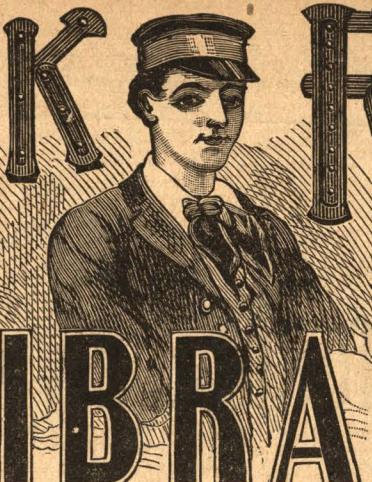


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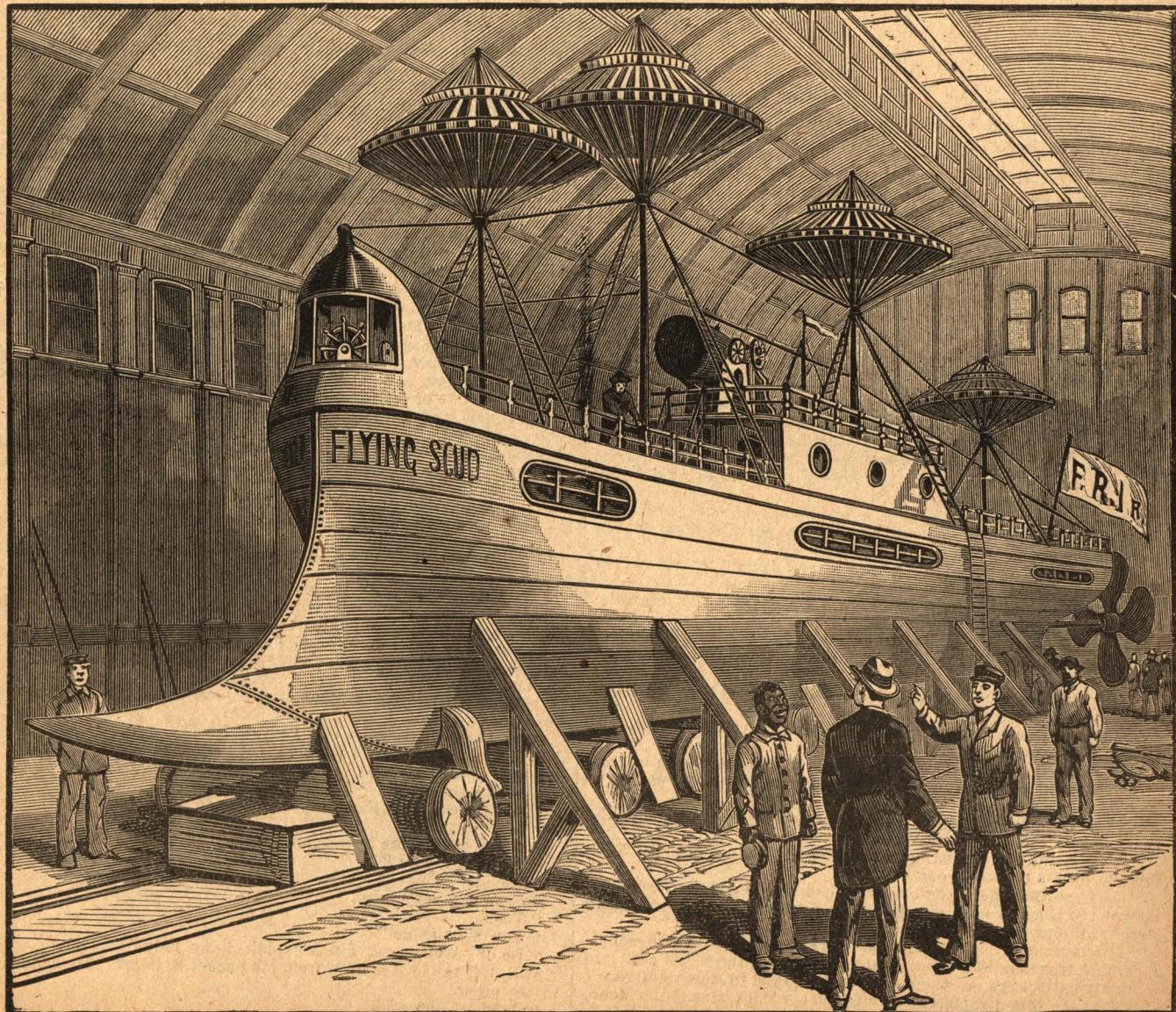
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Lost in the Mountains of the Moon: or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Great Trip With His New Air-Ship, the "Scud."

By "NONAME."



Frank led the way across the shop yards and into a high-arched building. Here, upon a series of rollers, rested the famous air-ship. The Flying Scud was truly a most wonderful invention. The broker from Wall street gazed upon the aerial wonder for a time spellbound.

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Lost in the Mountains of the Moon;

OR,

FRANK READE, JR.'S GREAT TRIP WITH HIS NEW AIR-SHIP, THE "SCUD."

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Under the Equator From Ecuador to Borneo," "Frank Reade, Jr.'s 'Sky Scraper,'" "Under the Yellow Sea," "Frank Reade, Jr.'s Prairie Whirlwind; or, The Mystery of the Hidden Canyon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE FATE OF THE EXPLORERS.

READERS of certain New York papers were one day confronted with a peculiar advertisement, which read:

"ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD!"

"Millionaire Belden offers this handsome sum for the rescue of his son, Ward Belden, a would-be African explorer, who left his home two years ago to emulate Stanley, and seek fame and thrilling adventure in the Dark Continent. The story is a peculiar one.

"It seemed that young Belden, who is well known in New York social life, had acquired a mania for African exploration, derived no doubt from reading Stanley's books.

"As Walter Belden, his father, the well-known millionaire, was given to indulging his son in any desired taste, he did not interpose serious objection to Ward's enterprise.

"One day, not two years since, the young explorer left New York for St. Paul de Loanda aboard a coasting steamer.

"With him were two college friends—Jack Peters and Allie Vane, also two servants, who, however, deserted them in Terciera.

"The trio of adventurous youths finally reached St. Paul safe and sound. Then they began operations in a masterful way.

"With plenty of money young Belden was able to fit out just such an expedition as he desired.

"Several hundred stout natives were hired as a body guard. All manner of provisions and equipments were purchased, and thus equipped the explorers set out.

"For months they toiled and struggled and fought their way into the vast depths of the African wilderness.

"News came back to the coast from them at irregular intervals. Then there came a time when all tidings ceased.

"The little party had gone into the wilderness and were swallowed up as completely as if buried in the ocean. What had been their fate?

"Ivory traders who knew the region well shrugged their shoulders and said significantly:

"They will never come back. No one ever returns from the Wooloomoo country."

"After waiting a long while for tidings Millionaire Belden became greatly worried and determined to at once take active measures to learn his son's fate.

"So he commissioned some expert native scouts to go into the heart of Africa and make inquiries.

"After months of wandering and futile quest these returned. They brought back a terrible report.

"This was that the young explorers had wandered into the Mountains of the Moon, a wild, unexplored and mysterious region. There were traditions galore of this part of Africa.

"It was claimed that a savage race of giants inhabited these mountains, that travelers who ventured thither were captured and cast into a mighty extinct crater, where they were allowed to slowly starve.

"That the young explorers were lost in the Mountains of the Moon, was absolutely declared a fact by the native scouts.

"This report greatly excited Mr. Belden. He was plunged into an agony of grief and remorse.

"Oh, why did I let Ward undertake such a foolhardy thing?" he cried. "I should have known what the result would be. What shall I do?"

"In this frantic state of mind, he put the tremendous \$100,000 reward advertisement in the papers. Of course there were answers enough.

"Legions of cranks, crack-brained travelers, and others responded to the call. None of their plans, however, were to be for a moment considered feasible.

"But a tall, well formed and jovial appearing man dropped into the millionaire's Wall street office.

"Ah, Dalton, my friend, how are you?" cried the millionaire, cheerily. "What can I do for you?"

"Ben Dalton, who is known to every man in Wall street as the most genial of brokers, replied:

"Belden, I have seen your advertisement. I don't want your hundred thousand reward, but I am going to show you a plan for learning the fate of your son."

"Of course the millionaire was delighted. No time was lost by Dalton in elaborating his scheme. Belden at once accepted it. What the scheme is our correspondent has not yet been able to learn, but it is declared that Ben Dalton will at once proceed to carry it out. Meanwhile the public awaits developments with interest, and it is certainly hoped that the popular broker may succeed in unraveling the great mystery of young Belden's fate beyond all doubt."

Here the newspaper account ended. At least two men who read it, smiled.

They were Belden and Dalton.

The plan proposed by Dalton we will now reveal to the reader for the more logical development of the incidents of our story.

Dalton's first words upon conferring with the millionaire, were exactly as given in the newspapers. But the broker went on to elaborate his plan.

"I don't believe, Belden, that you can ever effect the rescue of your son by any overland expedition."

"Ah, but if I only knew that he was alive!"

"Undoubtedly he is. I imagine that they have become tangled up in those mountains and are either beleaguered by savage tribes or cannot find their way out!"

"Do you really think so?" cried Belden, eagerly.

"I do!"

"What is your plan for reaching them then, if not overland?"

"Through the air."

"The air?"

Belden was astounded.

"Yes!"

"You mystify me!"

"Do I? Well, then, I will explain more fully!"

With this the broker drew from his pocket a letter. He handed it to the other.

"Read it!" he said.

Belden took the missive.

Then he read, written in a clear, bold legible hand:

"DEAR DALTON: In answer to yours of the by-gone week I will say, that the great air-ship is at last completed. The Flying Scud will very soon fly with her inventor and crew on board. If you care to take the mighty risk and incur the hardships of such a voyage, you may consider yourself my guest upon her maiden cruise, which will be at least some six or eight thousand miles in air. I shall be glad to see you at any time. Barney and Pomp send their best regards.

"I am your friend,

"FRANK READE, JR.,
"Readestown, U. S. A."

For a moment after reading this exciting bit of information Belden was silent. Finally he mastered himself sufficiently to speak:

"This Frank Reade, Jr., is a great inventor, is he not? I have heard much of him."

"Yes," replied the big-hearted broker, "and he is one of my best friends. Now you can guess my plan."

"Will Mr. Reade be willing to go to Africa?"

"I think he will be delighted to have the great object of rescue in view. It is an incentive."

"I see!" said Belden, hopefully. "I will pay the hundred thousand cheerfully."

"He will not take it."

"What?"

"He is a very wealthy man himself and would be greatly insulted.

He will enjoy the adventures as I shall myself."

Tears stood in Belden's eyes.

"You are both kind!" he said.

Dalton arose and grasped Belden's hand, saying earnestly:

"Rest assured, Walter, I will do my best to rescue your son. I will at once go to Readestown and confer with Mr. Reade. I feel sure that if Ward is alive we shall find him."

"God bless you!" said the afflicted father, brokenly. "I shall pray for your success!"

Dalton at once went to a telegraph office and sent the following message to Readestown:

"FRANK READE, JR.—Will accept your generous offer. Expect me up to see you to-morrow if nothing fails. Yours ever,

"BEN DALTON."

Upon receiving this message Frank Reade, Jr., the famous young inventor, was greatly pleased.

It found him busily at work in his private office upon some plans. He at once arose and pressed an electric bell.

Into the room there bounced two curious characters. As they are to figure prominently in this story we will take a look at them.

One was a negro, black as coal, with gleaming rows of ivories and dancing eyeballs.

He was called Pomp, and was as devoted to his young master as could be. The other was an Irishman, a genuine type of Celt, with a shock of red hair and a mug like a chimpanzee.

Barney O'Shea was his name, and he was equally as devoted to Frank as the negro.

The two servitors of the great inventor were the warmest of friends, though given much to friendly nagging and bickering.

Frank Reade, Jr., himself a young, handsome and talented fellow, confronted the two servitors, and said:

"Barney and Pomp, I want you to have the Scud all ready for immediate departure from Readestown. I have just received word from my friend, Ben Dalton, of New York, that he will accompany us."

This announcement seemed to delight Barney and Pomp.

CHAPTER II.

THE AIR-SHIP.

"WHURROO!" cried Barney, "that's the koind av talk I loike. Be-gorra, I'm wid yez, Misther Frank. Up to me arrum pits."

"Golly!" shouted Pomp, executing a double shuffle, "dis chile am done tired ob loafin' around Readestown any longer, Marse Frank!"

"Then you are both ready for business?" asked Frank.

"Yo' kin bet yo' life!"

"Be off, then, and see that you leave nothing undone. Remember to have everything ready!"

"All right, sor!"

"We're gwine, Marse Frank!"

And both jokers started for the door. Their irrepressible natures here asserted themselves.

The door was narrow and they tried each to get through at the same time.

The result was a collision and a wedge. Barney indignantly began to pull the darky's kinky wool, and the latter tunked the Celt in the ribs.

"Hi dar, yo' big Iish mucker," cried Pomp, angrily, "keep yo' nasty han's out ob mah hair!"

"Begorra, lave off tickling me ribs!" roared Barney. "Lave off, I say!"

"I done gib yo' a trashin'!"

"Yez ain't able!"

"Hi dar!"

"Look out, ye black ape!"

And the two jokers, wedged in the door, were having it out hammer and tongs, when Frank interfered.

"Hold on, you rascals!" he cried, authoritatively. "That is enough of that!"

With which he pushed them both through the door, and away they scurried to escape a reprimand.

The following day, as promised, the morning train brought Dalton to Readestown.

The broker was at once driven to the Reade machine works.

He was met at the gate by Frank, who gripped his hand and said:

"Delighted to see you, Ben. You are right on time."

A man can afford to be when he receives such an invitation," replied the broker.

"I suppose you are ready to start at any time?"

"Indeed I am."

"I will try and not lose you in the clouds," said Frank, jocularly. "The Scud is a stanch vessel and I think will stand any amount of hard usage."

"Good!" cried the broker, with apparent satisfaction: "and now to business. I have an important matter to discuss with you."

Frank regarded his friend with some surprise.

"Indeed!" he said. "May I ask what it is?"

Both entered the office and were seated. The broker placed a map on the table.

"Have you decided to what part of the world you will go, Frank?" he asked.

"I had thought of a trip over South America to Tierra del Fuego."

The broker looked disappointed.

"Could you be induced to change your plans upon a satisfactory explanation of my desire for you to do so?"

"Why, certainly!" replied the young inventor, readily. "To what part of the world do you desire to go?"

"To Africa!"

"That suits me. We will go to the Dark Continent then."

Dalton's face cleared.

"That is kind of you, Frank!" he said. "When I have told you my reason for the change of plan I am sure I shall have your hearty sympathy and co-operation."

"I shall be pleased to hear them," said Frank.

With this Dalton told him explicitly of the Belden expedition into Central Africa.

Frank listened intently, and as Dalton had hoped was greatly interested.

He asked all manner of questions about the expedition and its object, and then seizing Dalton's hand cried:

"Why this gives us an incentive to visit Africa. Nothing could have worked better. If young Belden is lost in those mountains we will certainly find him."

"I will wire Mr. Belden at once," cried the broker, joyously; "that will greatly relieve his suspense."

"By the way, you have not seen the air-ship yet."

"Not yet."

"Come with me."

"I will be delighted."

Frank led the way across the shop yards and into a high-arched building. Here, upon a series of rollers, rested the famous air-ship.

The Flying Scud was truly a most wonderful invention.

The broker from Wall street gazed upon the aerial wonder for a time spellbound.

He saw what looked like a rakish craft built upon the lines of a government cruiser.

The long, rakish bow tapered into a keen, pointed ram. The decks were protected all around by highly polished brass hand rails.

Frank led his visitor forward, and at once proceeded to explain to him all the fine points of the Scud.

"She is made of the lightest metal known—aluminum!" said Frank. "Her hull is of this metal lined with the thinnest and toughest of steel, and capable of resisting a rifle bullet."

"That is a wise precaution!" declared the broker, "for I have no doubt we shall encounter foes!"

"Certainly! the motive power is that huge propeller, whose blades are of thin platinum, and it is driven by electric engines of great power, an invention of my own, and which is a secret."

"In the side of the hull are large plate glass windows, as you see. Upon the cabin is a powerful search-light, which will throw a light for two miles."

"Grand!" exclaimed Dalton; "surely it is a triumph!"

"The elevating power is furnished by the rotascopes, four in number," continued Frank; "they are capable of many hundred revolutions per minute, and will support a much heavier body. Let us now go into the cabin."

To attempt a description of all the wonderful details of the exterior of the air-ship would require a great deal of space. We will, therefore, pass over them, and go on with a meager description of the interior appointments.

The hull of the Scud was divided into any number of compartments.

There was the main cabin or saloon elegantly upholstered and appointed. Also staterooms for the voyagers, a dining saloon, a cooking galley for Pomp, a gun room, where all varieties of small arms and ammunition were kept.

Also there was the pilot-house with its nautical instruments just

the same as aboard ship; the engine room where were wonderful pieces of machinery, the pride of Frank's heart, and upon which rested the motive power of the air-ship.

We trust the reader will be content with this wholly inadequate description of a wonderful invention, which the artist can perhaps illustrate much better with his pencil than the author with his pen.

It is needless to say that Ben Dalton was delighted.

"I am just itching to get aboard the *Scud* and sail the blue ether!" he cried. "What a wonderful sensation it will be!"

"I trust that our expedition will be a success!" said Frank.

"There is no reason why we should not start at once."

"Are you ready?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then we will sail to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"Yes!"

"I am delighted," cried Dalton, and he hurried away to wire the good news to Mr. Belden.

Almost instantly the telegraph flashed the news from one end of the continent to the other that Frank Reade, Jr., and his air-ship were going in quest of the African explorers who were lost in the Mountains of the Moon.

The next morning scores of newspaper men flocked into Readestown with note-book and camera to see the air-ship start, and, if possible, to interview the voyagers.

Barney and Pomp had been industrious.

In spite of their perennial love for chaffing each other, they never neglected a duty and the present occasion was no exception.

The air-ship was in readiness even to every little detail.

At the appointed hour, the *Scud* was slid out of her house by the rollers upon which she rested.

Then the great rotascopes and propeller were oiled and the electric engines adjusted for the last time.

Thus done, all was ready.

The voyagers went aboard.

Barney went into the pilot-house where was the electric key board which governed all the machinery.

Frank and Ben Dalton stood by the rail; Pomp was near by.

A great crowd was waiting in the streets of Readestown to see the ascension.

Those in Readestown who were acquainted with Frank Reade, Jr., did not doubt but that the ascension would be a success.

But the strangers were many of them doubtful, and as time went on a murmur went up.

"It is a fraud!"

"There will be no ascension. The problem of aerial navigation has not yet been solved, nor will it ever be in this generation."

But even as the doubters were freely expressing their opinions, a great shout went up which made the ground fairly tremble.

"There she goes!"

"Hurrah!"

"She is a dandy!"

This was certainly no exaggeration. Up into the air, with the grace of a monster eagle, the air ship rose.

Up and up she shot like a mighty bird of passage. The suspense of the moment was great.

A thousand conflicting emotions surged through the bosoms of the multitude of spectators.

Would she keep afloat?

With the utmost intensity the great throng watched the air ship as she glided upward and bathed herself in a bank of silvery clouds.

CHAPTER III.

ACROSS THE SEAS.

But the air-ship did not fall.

The predictions of the croakers were not verified. The problem of aerial navigation was beyond all peradventure solved.

Up in the zenith hung the air-ship for a time.

Then she bore down for the horizon, traveling rapidly to the eastward. The crowd watched her until she was but a speck in the blue sky.

There was one watched her with greater interest than the others.

This was Walter Belden.

He knew that it was a forlorn hope for the rescue of his lost son. He prayed for its success.

Those on board the air ship were in the highest of spirits.

The broker, Ben Dalton, could not conceal his sensations of extreme pleasure. He walked the deck with great excitement.

As he gazed upon the earth so far below and realized the success of the air-ship, he cried:

"Frank, you are the most wonderful man in the world. You have achieved the greatest of earthly triumphs."

"I am afraid you are too eulogistic," laughed Frank.

"Not a bit of it. Why, I'll bet any crowned head in Europe would give a year's income to be in my shoes just now!"

Readestown was soon shut from view. The panorama spread below was a wonderful and ever-varying one.

Dalton could do nothing but sit at the rail and gaze down upon it.

Over rivers, lakes, mountains and plains, the Flying *Scud* sailed on in majesty.

Hours passed like minutes to the voyagers, and almost before they knew it night was at hand.

With a powerful glass Dalton could discern small objects far below.

He saw people upon the earth gaze with wonder at the strange vision in the air.

Farmers at the plow, teamsters on the highway, children at play—all turned a startled gaze upward.

In the cities and towns great masses of people congregated in deep wonderment.

They made all manner of signals to the voyagers in the air.

Dalton amused himself by writing little messages upon balls of paper, and, attaching a small weight, sent them down to the earth.

Darkness put a stop to this childish sport, but the air-ship did not stop in its course.

The search-light now threw a mighty traveling pathway of light down to the earth.

In its profound glare strange scenes were witnessed. Wherever human beings were seen all were gazing upward with wonderment.

But after a time all this passed away.

A deep, sullen roar came up from below. It was the boom of breakers on a rock-bound coast.

Then the tossing waves of the sea lay far below. Upon its broad bosom white-sailed craft crossed the path of the search-light.

Up above, the sky was studded with diamond like stars. A strong wind, laden with the night damp, met the air-ship.

So that after a time the voyagers were contented to repair to the cabin, where it was much warmer.

For many days the air-ship traveled over the rolling ocean.

Thus far they had met with only the best of weather; but now there came a change.

They were destined to meet with a tempest, and such a one as they had never seen before.

The stormy Atlantic is seldom at rest.

Her rolling billows are always suggestive of unrest and lurking malice.

A storm over her could not be less terrific than one upon her bosom.

Frank knew this, and when a sharp squall came up from the southeast he sent the air-ship up in the hope of getting above it.

But this did not seem so easy. At an altitude of two miles the agitation in the atmosphere was felt to an alarming extent. To go higher was of course possible, but the rarity of the air was so intense that it was extremely unpleasant.

The voyagers were not pleased with the situation.

Dalton's delight turned to genuine alarm.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, "if anything should happen to the rotascopes, Frank, what then?"

"We should fall into the sea," replied the young inventor.

"Jericho! that would be death!"

"Certainly!"

"Upon my word, I can't say that I like the situation. What are we going to do?"

"Meet and weather the storm if we can!" replied Frank, resolutely.

"But can we?"

"We will hope so!"

The next moment the storm broke. What happened in the ensuing two hours was ever after like a hideous dream to all.

It seemed as if giant hands had picked the air-ship up and hurled it into illimitable space.

Frank clung to the wheel in the pilot house and kept the propeller and rotascopes at work.

He knew that it was best to keep the air-ship head on to the storm and so the battle went on.

The greatest danger was that the rotascopes would be blown away. In that case the ship must fall.

Nothing could be seen through the cabin windows.

But that they were at a great altitude was known as heavy frost covered the glass and iron work. The cold was most bitter and the voyagers suffered extremely.

And on and on, they knew not whither, they were being whirled and hurled and tumbled and tossed.

It was impossible to stand without clinging to some stationary object.

It was an experience which they never cared to repeat.

But the stalwart air-ship held out valiantly against the fierce blast and the storm finally ceased.

When the clouds rolled away, and the early light of dawn broke, it was a happy moment for all.

"Whew!" cried the broker, excitedly. "I wouldn't take my chances that way again for a farm down East."

Frank laughed.

"It was a bad one," he declared. "But we may meet a worse one before we end this voyage."

"I shall hope not, at least, on the sea."

"That is true. On land we could, at least, get the shelter of some high object and anchor the ship. Perhaps we will be lucky enough, however, to escape another such experience."

One day the air-ship sighted the Azores and passed over those islands.

Then Teneriffe, with its mighty peak, and at last the coast of Africa.

As the shores of the Dark Continent burst upon their view the sensations of the travelers can be imagined.

They saw a long rocky line of coast extending southward. High cliffs of basalt were fringed with the wildest of tropical growth.

Chattering monkeys disported themselves in cocoanut groves. Flocks of wild fowl dotted the waters of the lagoon.

In the depths of the jungle the tiger and the hyena slunk out of sight. On the grassy plain, and in the forests, the elephant and the lion roared, with the zebra and the tall giraffe.

All the wonders of the wonderful continent were thus revealed in panorama to the aerial voyagers.

With interest all gazed upon the scene.

For many miles into the interior the air-ship sailed.

Then the first sign of human life was encountered.

Suddenly Dalton was leaning over the rail, shouted:

"Hurrat! there they are!"

All rushed to the rail.

"Phwat's that, sor?" cried Barney. "Och hone, phwere is the nay-gur? Shure, Misster Pomp, an' wud yez take a luk at yure ancisters?"

Pomp bridled up at this.

"Don' yo' gib me no sass, Iish!" he spluttered. "I'se bo'n in ole Vargeeny, an' don' yo' fo'git. Don' own no 'lation to dem niggers down dere!"

All laughed at this.

But yet the black denizens of Afric's untaught wilds seemed to be very comfortably situated for all of Pomp's contemptuous disavowal.

To be sure, many of their kin in "Ole Vargeeny" might be worse off.

The native village consisted of a thousand or more bamboo huts, cleverly thatched with jungle grass. These were cone shaped and quite respectable in appearance.

But the natives themselves somewhat discredited their dwellings.

They were ugly and naked, with the bare exception of breech clout.

Most of them wore enormous and disfiguring hoops of ivory in ears and nose, and piled their abnormal growth of hair up on their heads to a fearful height.

There was certainly nothing comely or attractive about the personal appearance of these denizens of the wilds.

They were intensely excited at the appearance of the air-ship.

The African is mightily superstitious, and as a result the sudden appearance in the sky of such a vision as the Scud had its dire effect upon them.

In their simple state they knew nothing of the sciences of civilization or the possibilities of a modern American inventive mind.

Naturally they were prone to regard the air-ship as a supernatural appearance, and to which they must, on peril of their lives, yield due reverence.

So down they all fell, men, women and children upon their faces, in the most abject of supplication.

The air-ship hovered over the little village for some moments, and Ben Dalton cried:

"What are you going to do, Frank?"

"I am going down and hold a confab with them for diversion" replied the young inventor.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FRIENDLY MAKONAS.

THIS was just what Dalton wanted. As the air ship settled down, he clapped his hands with delight, like a veritable school boy.

"I tell you we are making a great impression on those fellows," he cried, jocularly. "They think we are the children of the Great Mogul."

"That is true," agreed Frank. "We will disabuse their minds of that!"

The air ship settled rapidly. Frank allowed it to rest upon the ground in the very midst of the prostrate natives.

None of them dared to look up until Frank went to the rail and shouted to them.

They did not understand him, but a human voice reassured them, and soon all were upon their feet.

"They don't understand you," said Dalton.

"No," replied Frank. "It is evident that they never saw people of our nationality before!"

Then an idea occurred to him.

He knew that this part of Africa was the stamping ground of the Portuguese traders.

It was possible that some of them had penetrated to this place, and if so, possibly some of the natives had learned the tongue.

Frank was fairly familiar with the Portuguese language. One of the natives, a distinguished looking old man in a lion skin robe advanced.

Frank addressed him:

"We come as friends," he said in Portuguese, "have no fear."

The native ruler bowed profoundly and reverently.

"Welcome to Makonaland," he replied in broken Portuguese. "Oh, you that fly in the air! We worship you!"

"We want no worship," replied Frank. "We are only human beings the same as you."

Makona, which was the ruler's name, seemed much reassured and even became talkative, coming to the air-ship's rail.

In this manner Frank gradually overcame the fears of the natives, and they became quite social.

In a short while Frank had learned some interesting facts.

The Makonas were an industrious and fairly intelligent tribe, and made war upon nobody.

But they were many times the victims of unscrupulous foes. Especially did they stand in terror of the slave traders.

"The wretches!" exclaimed Frank, indignantly. "I wish they would come along here now and attempt any of their nefarious games. I think I would very quickly settle their cases."

The Makonas now became profuse in their friendly overtures.

They thronged about the air-ship and made all manner of demonstrations. Gifts and offerings were brought to the distinguished visitors.

Each was offered a half dozen wives of their own choosing, but this offer was politely declined.

Then King Makona's men brought from the huts a number of lion skins, and spreading them upon the ground, made court for their king, who held a really royal reception.

A genuine barbecue was quickly in process, a wild boar being impaled on a long stake and roasted over the burning embers.

Also in gourds the Makonas brought a curious kind of liquor which was almost intoxicating.

Barney and Pomp could not get their fill of this.

"Begorra, naygur!" cried the jovial Celt. "I aven't a worru'd to say agin yure ancisters any more. It's royal foine people they air."

"Golly! I done fink I might be proud ob dem mahse'f," agreed Pomp.

"I allass thought they was a passel av cannibals but divil do I think so now."

"Yah, chile, but yo' oughter cum to ole Vargeeny when dis chile was at hum afo' de war. 'Possum stews an' coon roasts wif de bes' ob chink-pins fo' dessert. Yah, dat am de way to lib I tell yo."

Barney was not to be outdone.

"'Whurroo!' he cried. "That's all roight. But yez should have seen the O'Sheas of Ballyhooley. Shure, they were the foolest people in tin counties about, an' aven ole Brian Boru himself has ate at the table av me great-ancister."

"Specs yo' am right," agreed Pomp, scratching his head. "But what am yo' ancisters to-day, Iish?"

Barney gave a groan.

"They'd be there now, in their ancstral halls, av it wasn't for the devils av English, bad cess to thim!"

"Berry sorry fo' yo'," said Pomp, sympathetically. "But don' yo' feel bad about it, fo' I have so many ancestors dat I kin willin'y spare yo' a few."

Barney made a grimace.

"Barrin' the color that moight do!" he said.

At this moment the sound of weird music burst upon the air.

The natives, with drums and a peculiar kind of reed pipe, were making an effort at entertainment for the benefit of their guests.

King Makona squat down in the center of his lion skin mats, and the musicians were grouped around.

Then a number of women, not ungraceful either, danced a strange sort of dance.

Of course the aerial voyagers professed to enjoy all this.

But after a few hours spent thus Ben Dalton said:

"Shall we tarry here much longer, Frank?"

"No!" replied the young inventor promptly. "We are losing time. We wil go on at once."

So a farewell was bade to King Makona and his people, and once more the Scud flew on her way.

The adventure had proved interesting and pleasant, but not at all thrilling. However, exciting experiences were at hand.

The Scud sped on her way all that night—over jungle and forest.

At times there was evidence that they were passing over human habitations.

Great fires were seen below, and even the dancing forms of the excited black natives.

But with daylight a wonderful scene was spread before our voyagers.

There was revealed a mighty growth of forest and it was thickly peopled with animal life.

Dalton was at the rail chatting with Pomp when both beheld a thrilling scene below.

In a forest glade were a number of men engaged in battle with a lion.

Three of the men were Europeans, the rest were natives.

The lion had charged and one of the men was crushed beneath his giant paws. It was a horrible situation.

There the huge beast held the unfortunate man pinned to the ground. Roaring furiously he kept the others at bay.

It was certain that the unfortunate victim's life was sacrificed unless he could be given succor at once.

"Mercy on us!" screamed Dalton; "he will kill the man! Help! Frank, come quick!"

Frank heard the cry and came rushing out of the cabin.

Barney brought the air-ship about without delay. Then all rushed to the rail.

The lion hunters had seen the appearance of the air-ship from below, and waved their arms wildly.

They dared not fire at the lion, for fear of killing their friend. It was necessary to do something desperate at once.

Frank, with his eagle eye, took in the situation at a glance.

For a brief moment he was undecided how to act. Then he did what proved to be the best thing.

Quick as a flash he sprung to the pilot-house.

Down sank the air-ship.

Straight down over the lion it went. Down until it was within a few feet of the monster.

As Frank had believed, the attention of the animal was distracted. It partly relaxed its grip on the victim, and looked up in apparent astonishment at the aerial monster bearing down upon it.

It was but natural that the beast should partly shrink from this unknown foe.

But not in terror.

Fear is not an element of the Africian lion's nature. It was solely a shrewd effort to gain the vantage of this new assailant.

Meanwhile the lion hunters had hailed the aerial voyagers.

"For the love of Heaven, save him if you can!" shouted one of them.

"We will try it," replied Dalton. "Who are you?"

"We are officers of Her Majesty's service," was the reply. "We came out here for a bit of sport."

"Glad to meet you!"

"Our names are Lieut. Vandyke, Corporal Allison, and Chauncey Dane. Who are you?"

"This is Frank Reade, Jr.'s air-ship, the Scud."

"An air-ship! You must be Americans!"

"We are proud to be called such."

"And you should be. Only people of your nation would ever be able to solve the daring problem of aerial navigation."

"Thank you."

"It is the homage of England to America. Save our friend Allison, we will worship you."

"We will try it," replied Ben.

Meanwhile Frank had not been idle. He had arrived at the logical conclusion that to conquer the lion with a bullet was not possible.

Or at least it was not safe for there was great danger of also killing Allison, the imprisoned man.

He was frightfully torn, but yet was conscious and cool and nervy as could be.

He even ventured to address Frank.

"It is kind of you to try and save me!" he said, "but do not imperil your own lives!"

"Have no fear of that!" said Frank. "I hope to get the lion's attention, if I can. Do not move, and I will see what can be done."

With this the young inventor proceeded to carry out what he deemed a secure plan.

While Allison, the imprisoned but plucky man, coolly awaited results. They came quickly.

CHAPTER V.

THE HUNTING PARTY.

FRANK produced an electric wire from the pilot-house.

The lion was still gazing upward at the air-ship and roaring furiously.

But he did not seem inclined to relax his grip on his victim.

Frank muttered grimly:

"We will see my tawny friend whether you will move or not. I rather think you will!"

The wire Frank carried was what might be called a "live wire," and was connected with the dynamo.

He carried it in hands gloved with rubber, so that he was properly insulated.

Leaning over the rail, Frank lowered the wire.

The lion affected not to notice it, but showed his horrible fangs more and roared.

Down sank the wire until its tip touched for an instant the lion's fur.

There was a flash of light, and instantly a spot was burned out of the creature's hide as big as a tea cup. Only a flash and a puff of smoke.

Then the wire swung about and struck the lion's nose.

There was a lightning flash, an awful roar of agony, a shock, and the king of beasts was fairly lifted from the ground and hurled yards away, limp as a rag.

The shock was a most terrific one, and flesh and bone could not hope to withstand it.

Wild cheers burst from the hunters below.

In a moment they rushed forward and surrounded their rescued comrade.

Though he was badly torn, Allison was quite able to get upon his feet, and protested that he was all right.

However, his wounds were carefully dressed, then mutual introduction followed. The Englishmen were overglad to meet the Americans. Frank showed them over the air ship, and told them of the object of his visit to Africa.

They listened with the deepest of interest and Lieutenant Vandyke, who after all was a Dutchman, though in English service, cried:

"There is but one great regret in my life now, and that is that I cannot go with you to the Mountains of the Moon. I would give the world to accompany you!"

The black natives had removed the skin from the dead lion and it was presented to Allison as a solace for his injuries.

"We shall not forget you and the great service you have done us, Mr. Reade," cried Vandyke, "we thank you, heartily."

"Don't mention it," said Frank, lightly, "it is nothing!"

"It is much to me!" declared Allison. "It was the saving of my life."

Farewell greetings were exchanged and the hunting party was about to leave when a new incident occurred.

The scent of blood always excites an elephant, especially when that animal is in a wild state.

There was a tremendous bellowing in the jungle, and the ground trembled with a mighty tread.

Then out into the open there rushed a giant specimen of the jungle elephant—a literal Jumbo.

The elephant when in a fury is a foe not to be despised.

This specimen, being so near at hand and so deadly in earnest, could not help but impress the African adventurers with terror.

The hunters all cocked their rifles and raised them.

"Look out for him!" cried Vandyke. "He means business, and surely has us spotted."

This seemed certain.

The huge beast came bellowing on to the attack. What was to be done? Certainly something at once.

"My soul, Frank!" cried Dalton; "had we not better move the air-ship out of the way? What if the beast should strike us?"

"I don't believe he will," said Frank, coolly. "Keep steady! Remain in the pilot house, Barney."

"All right, sir!"

On came the elephant, trumpeting furiously. He was not, however, making a line for the air-ship.

His attention had been diverted by the natives.

They had thrown their assegais into his thick hide, so that he fairly bristled with them.

Yet they took good care not to come within his reach.

Frank had by this time returned from the cabin with a large rifle of his own invention.

It carried a large and most deadly shell of an explosive nature. He leveled the weapon.

Taking careful aim, he fired at the beast's body just back of the shoulder.

Crack—ping!

The conical bullet struck the beast full and fair, and penetrated the tough hide with the greatest of ease.

There followed a wild swaying and surging upon the elephant's part, and it was seen that a huge hole had been blown in his side.

The blood was rushing out in a perfect torrent.

Turning, the elephant came charging madly for the air-ship.

A cry of alarm went up from the voyagers, and Ben cried:

"Had we not better move, Frank? The beast may strike us."

"Keep cool!" said the young inventor, in steady tones. "I will handle him all right."

Quick as a flash Frank had placed another shell in the gun. Once more he took aim and fired at the beast.

This time the shell struck him in the trunk. It exploded with most terrific effect.

The elephant's great weapon of offense and defense was terribly shattered, being nearly severed and of no further use to it.

The fearful shock checked the maddened beast. The loss of blood also had begun to tell.

The elephant reeled, made a spasmodic lunge forward, and then fell. With a fearful groan it was almost instantly dead.

And cool and unconcerned as could well be imagined Frank Reade stood on the air-ship deck holding his smoking rifle.

The native hunters were stupefied and bowed in superstitious awe. The Englishmen, who understood the whole thing, cheered.

The elephant was truly a monster.

Its ivory tusks were extremely valuable, and they were sawed off by Barney. One of them was brought aboard the air-ship, and the other Frank bequeathed to the Englishmen.

"Well," cried Vandyke, "what will come next? We have stirred up a literal nest of the savage beasts."

"And but for the timely arrival of Mr. Reade and his air-ship we should have fared badly," declared Chauncey Dane.

The natives had begun to cut the elephant up, for the meat was esteemed by them most choice.

Elephant steak certainly is not bad eating, but none of our friends cared to try it.

Somewhat the air-ship tarried in the little glade.

Then leave was taken of the English Explorers. They declared it their purpose to at once return to the coast.

The accident to Allison completely changed their plans and it was deemed best to abandon the expedition.

A hearty farewell followed.

"We wish you the utmost success in your undertaking, Mr. Reade!" cried Vandyke, earnestly.

"Thank you," replied Frank. "I trust you will all get safely back to the coast."

Then the Scud mounted upward and started away once more upon her eventful journey.

The voyagers stood by the rail and watched the adventurers below until distance shut them from view.

Then the episode was relegated to the past and all looked forward to fresh incidents which were near at hand.

The day was intensely warm.

The aerial travelers had donned the lightest of clothing and cork hats, such as are used in all hot climes.

An awning was spread upon the deck of the air-ship and beneath this all were glad to recline at ease.

But towards evening a fresh breeze sprung up and cooled the air materially. It was a great relief.

Boundless plains were now reached which were close cropped by vast herds of the African buffalo.

At times these were seen to be pursued by blacks with assegais and nets.

In all cases the natives retreated in dismay at the approach of the air-ship.

Indeed it was impossible to get near enough to them to hold conversation or any kind of intercourse.

"They are evidently very much afraid of us!" said Dalton, with a laugh. "Well, I don't know as I blame them."

"Nor I be jabers!" cried Barney. "Not so long as that naygur shows his face at the rail. Shure they think it the ghost av some av their ancisters no doubt."

This was too much for Pomp.

Barney had been nagging him quite severely of late. The darky's patience was exhausted.

"Huh! don'y be so fresh, I'ish!" retorted he. "Dey jes' hab to lock at yo' ugly mug jes' once to skeer de life outen dem. Dat am jes' wha' am de mattah wif dem fo' suah, fo' dey fink it am de ghostis ob a gorilla!"

Barney made a desperate swipe at the darky.

But Pomp ducked his head and bolted straight for the Celt. He took the Irishman full in the stomach.

Then there was a crash.

Down went the Celt in a heap and Pomp on top of him. A terrific wrestle followed.

As it chanced what was merely a frolic came near proving a fearful tragedy.

They were at the moment not far from the edge of the air-ship's deck. Suddenly Barney rolled Pomp over violently.

A loud cry of warning and horror arose from Ben Dalton's lips.

It came too late.

Over the verge the two jokers went, and it seemed to a certain death too horrible to contemplate.

CHAPTER VI.

A CLOSE CALL FOR POMP.

"OH, my God!" cried Dalton wildly, "they have gone down to death!"

Frank had rushed on deck.

"What?" he yelled.

"Overboard!" shrieked Dalton.

The air-ship was three thousand feet in the air. To fall that distance meant certain death.

For a moment the two men looked at each other aghast.

Each was afraid to go to the rail,

But as they stood there with teeth chattering, Barney's head appeared over the bulwark.

He had clung with one hand to the rail. He drew himself up and sank on the deck.

Frank rushed to his side.

"Where is Pomp?" he cried huskily.

"Howly Vargin, save us!" cried the Celt in agony, "devil a bit do I know!"

"He has gone down to his death!" screamed Frank, angrily. "And all for your senseless fooling! I've a mind to kill you for it!"

"Thin, begorra, if he's gone down there, shure I'm goin', too!" cried the Celt desperately, as he sprang to the rail.

But Frank caught him by the shoulders.

"Hold, you fool," he cried. "Don't add suicide to murder. Stay where you are!"

The young inventor looked down to the earth. He could see nothing of Pomp so far below.

But he made no doubt that the darky's mangled body lay in some rocky cleft dashed to pieces, in the wilderness they were passing over.

"Lower the air ship," he commanded to Barney. "We must find the poor fellow and give him a decent burial."

Barney staggered into the pilot-house.

It was a terrible moment of agony for the Celt to know that his dear friend had met death through his supreme folly.

He sent the air ship down to within a hundred feet of the earth, and at this altitude it was allowed to sail about, while the voyagers looked for some sign of Pomp's mangled remains.

Finally Frank saw a shoe lying upon a shelf of rock. He knew that it belonged to Pomp and gave a great cry.

There was a deep crevice in the rocks and in that the young inventor believed that he would find the dead body of the darky.

He threw a rope ladder over and slid down to the ground.

He picked up the shoe. Beyond a doubt it was Pomp's. But nothing could be seen of the darky.

"That is queer," he mused, "this is about the spot where he should have struck."

Just at this moment Ben Dalton shouted over the rail:

"Can't you find him, Frank?"

The young inventor glanced upward for the first time. And as he did so, he gave a great cry.

"Down, down with the air-ship!" he shouted.

For it was an astounding spectacle which met his gaze. There suspended from the bottom of the air-ship's hull was Pomp.

He was insensible, and hung head downwards. A rope which was connected with the anchors, and which was entangled under the hull, had caught about his legs and held him suspended.

There he hung right under the air-ship. In going over the deck's verge with Barney, his head had struck against the sharp edge with such force that he was rendered unconscious.

That he would have died in his present position was a certainty.

Blood was already dripping from his nostrils. But succor was close at hand.

By Frank's order the air-ship was lowered.

The young inventor caught the darky's swinging body, and with a quick movement disentangled him.

He laid him upon the shelf of rock, and proceeded to restore him to consciousness.

Barney was so delighted to know that his beloved colleague was yet alive that he could hardly contain himself.

"Whurroo!" he shouted wildly. "Shure it's not meant for the naygur to die in that way. Wurra! wurral it's the best av good luck!"

Presently Pomp opened his eyes and gazed about him in the utmost of bewilderment.

As soon as he could speak he exclaimed thickly:

"Golly! dat was a drefful long ways to fall."

"But yez didn't fall, gossoon!" cried Barney, joyfully. "Shure, the best av luck saved ye, fer ye hung by yer heels atwixt and atween Hiven an' earth unther the air-ship, till Misther Frank found ye!"

"Dow' yo' say dat yo' no count, I'ishman!" spluttered Pomp, angrily, "didu't I jes' see mahsef fall to de earf de hull tree tousand feet?"

"No, no, yez didn't, acushla!" cried Barney, "it's mistaken yez are. Ax Misther Frank himself."

But it was of little use to try and convince the darky that he had not taken the great fall.

He grew very angry and pettish in the argument, and Frank was obliged to interfere.

"Never mind, Barney," he said; "we must humor him until he gets well. Then he will be all right."

"All roight, sor!" agreed the Celt. "I'll do jest as yez say."

Pomp was taken aboard the Scud and put to bed.

After a few hours' sleep, however, he was quite himself again, though he would not be convinced that he had not taken the frightful fall to the earth.

But the little affair pointed a very good moral to the two jokers.

They were more cautious in indulging in a rough and tumble on deck after that.

Days passed, and the Scud sailed on. Suddenly one morning Frank appeared on deck, and sighted with his glass a distant range of mountains whose summits were in the clouds.

"The Mountains of the Moon," he declared. "We are nearing the objective point of our journey."

All eyes were turned upon the distant mountains, and the deepest of interest was felt.

Various emotions surged through the breast of Ben Dalton. He watched the distant mountains intently.

He could not help but wonder what was the fate of the three lost young explorers.

Were they alive? If so, would it be possible to effect their rescue?

If they were in captivity in the power of the deadly Wooloomoos, the warlike tribe which dwelt in the Mountains of the Moon, it would certainly be a difficult matter to rescue them.

These savages were unusually fierce and crafty.

If they had spared the lives of their captives, it was doubtless only to make slaves of them.

This was a fate but little better than death. As slaves of the Wooloomoos, their predicament was a most fearful one.

But Dalton felt a more sickening sense, or rather conviction, that this was not the case, but that the young explorers were dead.

If so, it was hardly likely that any trace of them would ever be found.

It would be a sad and awful conclusion to carry back to their stricken parents and friends in New York. Ben set his teeth and muttered inwardly:

"I won't believe it until I have seen their dead bodies. They must be alive!"

Nearer now the great mountain range drew. It was a wonderful panorama which was spread before the voyagers.

The mountains were remarkably rugged and wild.

They extended in a semicircle or crescent, leaving a broad plateau of the same shape. This it was doubtless which had given them the name of the Mountains of the Moon.

Moreover, the Wooloomoos were moon worshipers, and upon the first night of every full moon climbed these mountains and made a human sacrifice upon the summit.

All this Ben had heard. He now gazed upon the region so replete with fabulous wonders with strange emotions.

The air-ship floated over the deep valleys and along the slopes of the mighty peaks.

The timber line could be plainly seen. Far above this occasional glaciers were glittering in the rarefied air.

"A wonderful region, is it not?" said Frank, as he came along to the rail.

"Indeed it is!" said Ben, earnestly, "there is not another like it in the wide world."

"I quite agree with you there."

"Whatever possessed those boys to come into such a region I don't see!"

"It was certainly a hazardous thing to do!"

"Hazardous! Why, it was sheer foolhardiness. A handful of natives familiar with these hills could entrap and annihilate a small army!"

Forests so mighty and dense, that the selvas of the Amazon were no comparison, were passed over.

There were terrific clefts, gorges and chasms, and the fastnesses of the mountains of the moon, were indeed dark and dreadful.

These fastnesses were inhabited as well by the most ravenous of wild beasts.

The tiger and lion here made their home. There were fierce packs of hyenas, yelling wolves and panthers. It was certainly a den of horrors.

Yet in the very center of these terrible wilds were long rolling plains of vastly fertile soil.

Peaceful and harmless indeed looked the smiling rivers which in the mountains were savage torrents. The plain was dotted with gem-like lakes.

But as yet no sign of human life had been seen.

That it existed there was no manner of doubt.

In these hills, among the savage beasts, and indeed if anything more fierce and wild themselves, dwelt a race of giants.

They were not as black as the other African tribes, and much finer looking and muscular.

But they were terrible warriors—merciless, blood-thirsty brigands, who lived by warring upon weaker tribes. These were the beings whom the three boy explorers had run foul of in their hazardous exploring tour.

CHAPTER. VII.

INTERCOURSE WITH THE WOOLOMOOS.

ANXIOUSLY the voyagers looked for some trace of the Wooloomoos. Thus far nothing had been seen of them. But just as the air-ship was floating along the face of a mighty cliff Dalton gave a great cry.

"Look!" he shouted. "By the gods of war did you ever see so big a man as that before?"

A deep mouthed cavern in the side of the mountain came suddenly into view.

A wide shelf of rock jutted out from its mouth.

Upon the very verge of this stood a powerful built man.

He was not exactly a negro, but shapely as a Caucasian and with features like an Arab.

He was dressed in a breech clout of lion skins and wore a cloak of some sort of jute like cloth. Upon his head was a peculiar head-dress of vari-colored birds' wings.

He carried a ponderous club upon which he leaned; while a blow-pipe and string of darts were fastened at his girdle.

He had been looking abstractedly down into the valley when the air-ship suddenly swung into view on his right.

The effect was startling.

With a loud yell the Wooloomoo, for doubtless he was one of that strange tribe, gave a backward leap into the cavern.

There he crouched half behind an angle watching the air-ship curiously.

"Too bad we could not have lassoed that fellow!" cried Ben Dalton. "I wish we could get a few points from him."

"He may give us a few points which we will not care to receive," said Frank, as he touched an electric spring.

Instantly a section of network of finest steel rose from the rail of the air-ship upon standards to the height of seven or eight feet.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Dalton, in amazement.

"You shall see," said Frank, coolly.

And at that moment the voyagers did see.

In the mouth of the cavern there now appeared a number of the natives who with one common impulse put their blow-pipes up and sent a shower of the darts rattling against the wire screen.

If Frank had not raised the screen thus opportunely no doubt some of the voyagers would have been struck.

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Ben, in amazement. "Who would think they could drive those little darts with such savage force?"

"There is good reason to fear those little missiles," said Frank.

"Are they especially deadly?"

"They are apt to be poisoned!"

Barney had allowed the air-ship to float quite near the entrance to the mountain cave.

For some distance into the cave objects could be seen, but beyond that all was darkness.

As Frank was anxious to see what was in the depths of the place he called to Pomp:

"Throw the search-light in there, Pomp. Let us see what it looks like."

"A' right, sah!" replied the darky.

So the search-light was turned on and its rays sent far into the cavern.

A wonderful sight was revealed.

Beyond a long high arched passage was revealed a large cavern chamber. This was decorated with palms and skins of animals and a throng of Wooloomoos were revealed there.

It was evidently their retreat, and a safe and secure one it was too.

As the light penetrated to this chamber the natives set up a tremendous howl.

A fresh shower of the darts came hissing about the air-ship.

One of these fell upon the deck and Frank picked it up.

He held it up to inspection and said:

"See, the point is discolored. There is no doubt but that this is a poisoned arrow."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Ben Dalton with a shiver. "I am glad it did not strike me!"

"I believe we cannot be too careful," said Frank.

"They mean business, don't they?"

"Evidently."

"Why not give them a shot?"

"Not yet!"

Frank was always averse to the unnecessary taking of human life. It was not yet time, as he fancied, to open fire upon the Wooloomoos. He fancied it possible to yet make friends with them. If so, then he would feel sorry to think that he had slaughtered any of them.

Frank's main desire was to attempt conciliatory overtures to the savage natives.

So he tried various methods of drawing them into a truce.

A white flag did not work. They evidently did not know what it meant for they fired a shower of darts at it.

"Begorra, that's oncivil!" cried Barney. "Shure, I'd give it to them back agin!"

"Not yet!" said Frank, whose patience seemed inexhaustible.

"We will try them again."

He went below decks and opened a locker in his own cabin.

From this he took what looked like a heap of minute linked chains.

It was, in fact, a complete suit of mail of his own invention.

The steel was hardened by a process which he alone knew, and which made it impervious to a rifle ball at any range.

Clad in this suit of armor, Frank felt that he could safely face the shower of darts.

It was the work of but a few moments for him to put it on. Then he again appeared on deck.

Dalton regarded him with amazement.

"Upon my word, Frank," he cried, "you look like a ghost of the fifteenth century. What have you got on?"

"Can't you see?" said Frank, with a laugh.

"A suit of mail."

"That is true."

"Is it—is it impervious?"

"No rifle bullets yet made can penetrate it."

Dalton was astounded.

At the same time he could not help admiring the wonderful triumph of inventive genius.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Out on deck, where those rascals can see me," replied Frank. "I want to have a talk with them if I can."

"No doubt you can, but—"

"What?"

"Will it amount to anything? I don't believe you can bring them to terms."

"Don't you? Well, there's nothing like trying. Here goes!"

Frank dropped the visor of his hood of mail, and then stepped out on that part of the deck which was unprotected by screen.

He was in full view of the savage cliff dwellers.

Instantly the air was full of the poisoned darts. They struck against the mail harmlessly, however.

Frank could laugh to scorn these weapons of the foe. They were evidently astonished at their failure to kill him.

Then they ceased firing.

Frank cried to Barney:

"Bring the ship nearer to the ledge. I am going to try and talk with them."

"All roight, sor!"

The Celt obeyed orders. The Scud was brought nearer to the ledge of rock, and Frank hailed the natives.

This time he obtained a response.

One of them, who appeared to be the chief, appeared in the cavern's mouth with both hands uplifted.

This was in token of a truce and Frank felt a thrill of triumph. Not a word could the native chief understand of English.

Nor could Frank understand the gibberish he uttered.

But after much effort they hit upon a species of sign talk, which, though laborious, did very well.

After a number of minor questions and answers had been exchanged, Frank said in sign talk:

"We come from a far country to search for three of our people. Have you seen them?"

Frank watched the native's face eagerly. The expression which he saw upon it gave a thrill and at the same time a strong conviction.

It was malevolent and murderous. For a moment the Wooloomoo did not make reply.

Then it came in surly fashion, to the effect that the mountains were sacred to their gods and they were bidden to cast all foes whom they captured into the crater of the Three Demons.

At least this was the name Frank interpreted from the confusing imitation of a fiend made by the Wooloomoo chief.

The latter easily illustrated the throwing of their victims into the crater by advancing to the edge of the precipice and making motions with his hands.

Frank felt at the moment like hurling the wretch over after his victims; but he kep' cool.

He saw at once that it was of no use to try and pacify or make friends with the Wooloomoos.

The best and only logical course was to impress upon their superstitious minds the fact that the aerial voyagers were superior beings, and allied to the gods.

So he began at once to impress this upon the black rascal.

Frank made signs to that effect and posed as effectually as he could for an agent of the gods.

The Wooloomoo listened intently but incredulously.

He shook his head in contempt. He saw the wings of the flying airship, and believed that he understood its mechanical principle. He would not believe that it was of supernatural construction or relation.

Frank was more than surprised at this practical view of matters taken by the ignorant native.

He saw at length that the only way to subdue the incredulity of his auditor was by a direct manifestation.

He made signs which conveyed to the other the information that he held control of the lightning, and could call it to his aid at any time.

The Wooloomoo grinned at this Munchausen like statement.

He did not believe it.

Frank had the necessary apparatus upon his body, and holding his mailed hand out for the Wooloomoo, motioned to him to touch it.

The rude native violently struck it with his own hand. The next moment he wished he hadn't.

A myriad of sparks flashed in his face like a shower of stars.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE CRATER.

WITH a sharp yell of pain, the astounded Wooloomoo drew back. His arm tingled like as if it was encased with hot coals.

But there stood his foe smilingly before him. Recovering himself, the Wooloomoo spokesman was for a moment nonplussed.

With this Frank shook sparks from his fingers like drops of water, made a halo of them about his head, and performed other apparently supernatural tricks.

Something like fear came into the Wooloomoo's face.

But he was not yet convinced.

Determined to prove to him beyond all doubt his superior power, Frank drew from his pocket an object which looked like a cigar.

He poised it in the air a moment and then hurled it against the side of the cliff some fifty feet distant.

There was a cannon-like explosion and tons of loose rock were dislodged. Still the obdurate native grinned.

Frank picked up a bar of iron from the deck and extended it to the Wooloomoo.

He motioned to the native to take hold of the rod with both hands.

The air-ship was on a level with and close to the shelf of rock. It was therefore easy for the native to obey.

He took hold of the iron rod and essayed to wrench it away from Frank.

With a grin and a most confident air he made the effort; but he never made a greater mistake in his life.

He was as powerless as a child in the grip of the strange, unseen power. Now that he had taken hold of the bar he could not let go.

This last inexplicable trick staggered the ignorant Wooloomoo.

His swarthy face overspread with a fearful light of terror; he essayed in vain to break away.

Trembling like an aspen he stood holding onto the bar of iron until great drops of sweat oozed from every pore.

Frank held him thus for some time. Then with a scornful laugh he released him.

"Go tell your people," he said in sign talk, "I can destroy you all with the greatest of ease."

The Wooloomoo slunk back into the cavern.

Frank returned on board the air-ship.

Ben Dalton and Barney and Pomp had been watching the parley with the greatest interest.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ben, when Frank stepped aboard. "You just settled his doubts in good shape, didn't you?"

"I tried to," replied Frank. "I guess he is satisfied now."

"He ought to be, but—"

"What?"

"What luck did you have in learning the fate of our three boys?"

"Nothing, except an intimation that like all captured foes, they had been thrown down the crater of a volcano which he called, as near as I could make out from the signs, the Three Demons or Three Devils."

"Then that is the horrible explanation of their fate," groaned Dalton. "Thrown into the crater of a volcano. Of course, they are dead!"

"Yet there is a chance."

"Ought not the crater to be near here?" asked Ben, finally.

"I don't see why it shouldn't."

"Then let us find it at once. We can learn nothing more from these black scoundrels. I have no idea of ever finding the boys now, but I want to see the spot where they were hurled to their death."

"You shall," agreed Frank. "Yonder mountain is a volcano if I am not mistaken."

The summit of the mountain which he indicated rose fully two thousand feet above their present position,

It had the appearance of a volcano, but its cone was not active. It was very likely extinct.

The fires may have burned out a thousand years ago. Or possibly they recurred only at long intervals.

But the mountain showed no signs of recent devastation. Frank sailed the air-ship up its slope.

Up, and up shot the Scud until finally the crater which occupied the top was in full view.

Then Dalton cried excitedly:

"Look! there are the Three Demons!"

The crater itself covered an immense tract, some square miles in extent.

There was every indication that it had been once a boiling sea of lava which issued from various cones in the crater.

The Three Demons were marvelous representations formed by Nature out of the rock of the crater, at its eastern verge.

Three singular jagged forms of rock they were, bearing at a distance a perfect likeness of three horned representatives of his Satanic majesty about to leap into the crater.

They were almost as accurate as if carved by the hand of man.

The voyagers gazed upon them spell-bound.

They overlooked a tremendous steep precipice, some three hundred feet in perpendicular.

To be hurled from this dizzy height was certainly not a fate to be desired.

The aerial voyagers gazed upon the jagged rocks at the base of the cliff with horror.

There was a heap of bones as large as a house. Hundreds of human beings had taken that awful plunge to death.

And there their bones lay whitening to the end of time. It was a most horrible reflection.

"God help us!" said Dalton, in a hushed voice. "We can carry no very cheering report back to Walter Belden of his darling son!"

"Shall we go down into the crater?" asked Frank.

"If you will be so kind. At least, we can gather up the remains of the poor lads!"

"If they can be identified."

"Let us hope they can!"

As the air-ship descended into the crater, a great flock of vultures rose. It gave all a sickening sense of horror.

The air ship rested upon the lava bed of the crater, just under the cliff. Then the voyagers sprung down from her deck.

In a few moments they were gazing upon the sickening spectacle. And a grawsome sight it was. Some of the skeletons were not as yet entirely devoid of flesh.

And there was one which appeared to be that of a white man. Dalton examined it closely.

"Can that be one of the boys?" he exclaimed, with horror. "I do not believe it!"

"Nor I," said Frank, who had also been examining the remains. "It does not belong to a white man as I believe."

"But—what flesh there remains looks white!"

"Does it? Take a closer view," said Frank. "You may think differently then."

Ben complied, and even placed his hand upon some of the flesh. He was satisfied at once.

The Wooloomoos were far from being a black race.

Their skin, viewed in a certain light, was almost white. That these remains belonged to one of their race was a clear certainty.

It stood to reason that as this spot was used as a place of execution by the natives, that they should here execute criminals of their own tribe as well as prisoners.

And that the remains here heaped up so fearfully might belong to both was a certain fact.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Ben Dalton with a shiver, "this is not a pleasant sight! It makes me faint!"

"I don't see anything here which looks like the remains of any of our own nationality."

"Nor I. Let us abandon that theory. I tell you!" cried Ben, joyfully, "I yet believe that Ward Belden and his friends are alive!"

"I can only hope you are right," said Frank, sincerely.

With this they left the terrible scene and went back to the Scud.

"Begorra, I saw something very quare jest now!" declared Barney.

All eyes were turned upon the Celt.

"What was it?" asked Frank.

"Shure, sor, as near as I could make out it was the futprint av a man that wore shoes. Divil a shoe did I see on the black divils!"

Frank and Ben gave a startled cry.

"What!" cried the young inventor. "Do you mean that, Barney?"

"Shure, I do, sor."

"Was it a fresh imprint?"

"Quite fresh, sor."

Frank and Ben exchanged startled glances. Here was a clew.

"Where did you see it?" asked Frank.

"Shure, sor, ferninst that big rock over yonder."

Frank and Ben looked in the direction indicated, and saw a huge block of lava, which lay near the center of the crater.

At once both men started for it.

A heap of sand had been blown up by the wind, and mixing with a little clay, made a compost. In this any reasonable pressure would leave an imprint.

And there, just as Barney had said was the imprint of a human foot. Moreover, it was a shapely foot, wearing a shoe of civilized make. It was an important discovery.

Frank knelt down and very critically examined the footprint.

When he arose he said:

"That has been made very recently. I should say that it was not yet six hours old.

"What white man could be passing this way so recently, unless it was Ward or one of his companions?" asked Ben Dalton.

Frank shook his head.

"That is a conundrum!" he said.

"Golly, Marse Frank. Wha' am dis?" cried Pomp, picking up a small object.

He held it up to the view of all.

It was a metallic cartridge shell of about forty-eight caliber. It had evidently been used in a repeating Winchester rifle. This was a certain clew.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LOST IS FOUND.

THERE was no longer any doubt but that white men had passed through the crater.

Dalton was jubilant.

"I tell you we are on the right track!" he cried. "That foot-print was made by Ward or one of his friends!"

"If so," rejoined Frank, "they cannot be far distant."

"No, they ought to be near at hand!"

"But—"

"What?"

"In what direction shall we go to find them?"

Frank looked again at the foot-print. It pointed to the west. He glanced back at the air-ship which was anchored some two hundred yards away.

"Barney and Pomp," he said, "you had better go back and stay by the air-ship. Ben, we will look further and see how far we can follow the trail!"

"Good!" cried Dalton. "I had not thought of that."

So Barney and Pomp returned to the air-ship.

Frank and Ben went on across the crater. This resulted in a fresh discovery.

They came upon more footprints. Some of them were bare, which was an indication that there were natives in the party.

For a few moments this puzzled the rescuers, until suddenly the truth dawned upon Frank.

"I have it!" he cried.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ben.

"Of course, the explorers took a train or retinue of foot soldiers and servants with them. These are their footprints, for they are always natives. Hurrah! We have found not only that the explorers are alive, but they must be in force somewhere in these hills, for they evidently have their train still with them."

Dalton was awfully excited.

He wrung Frank's hand.

"Isn't that good!" he cried, "then we are to find that not only are our boys alive, but they are still pluckily pursuing their explorations."

"Exactly!"

"That is too good. How I wish I could cable Belden at once."

Frank laughed.

"That will hardly be possible," he said. "But first let us make sure that we're right."

"Right!" gasped Dalton. "Can there be any doubt?"

"Indeed, there can, and much doubt too. For instance, those shoe-prints may have been made by some one of the Wooloomoos who had confiscated the shoes of their captives."

Ben Dalton's jaw fell.

"Come on," he said, huskily. "I can't stand this suspense."

With which they started away on the trail again. But they had not gone a hundred yards when a rifle shot and a loud yell caused them to halt.

They looked back and beheld an astounding sight.

Barney and Pomp beside the air-ship had fired the shot and were waving their arms warningly.

The reason for this was to be plainly seen.

To the southward the edge of the crater fairly swarmed with hostile Wooloomoo warriors.

They had leaped down into the crater and were running with all speed to cut off Frank and Ben.

For a moment the young inventor's face clouded.

He saw the deadly peril at a glance.

"My God! We are cut off Ben!" he cried.

This was only too true.

Before they could hope to reach the air-ship the savages must be upon them.

It would be madness to court close combat with them. The poison darts would speedily end their career.

There was nothing for it but to run in the opposite direction. There was no time to lose.

To make a virtue of necessity was the only course. But Frank signaled Barney and Pomp.

At once the sagacious pair in charge of the Scud scampered aboard and began to pull in the anchors.

This done, they sent the air-ship up into the air.

Meanwhile Frank and Ben had been speeding for their lives for the further edge of the crater.

The Wooloomoos came after them like thunderbolts. But all of the poisoned darts fell short.

"Run!" shouted Frank, who was a fast sprinter. "Don't let them get within range!"

"You're right I won't!" cried Ben, as he redoubled his exertions.

Faster and faster they ran. The crater wall was now near at hand.

Up it they scrambled.

From crag to crag they climbed, and then sank half fainting upon the ground at the summit.

For a brief moment they lay thus to regain their breath.

Then a dull explosion was heard. Barney and Pomp were dropping bombs down upon the Wooloomoos.

This checked their advance. Every bomb exploded in their midst killed dozens of them.

They scattered beneath such deadly execution. For the nonce the two fugitives were safe.

"Whew!" gasped Ben. "I wouldn't run that way again for a fortune. I'm nigh dead."

"It was a close one!" said Frank, "but—look here. This was the course followed by our explorers!"

Frank pointed to footprints quite visible in the soil. Ben was at once interested.

"You're right!" he cried, and then scrambling to his feet he followed them some ways back from the crater.

This brought him upon an astounding spectacle.

There in a thicket lay the contorted corpse of a coast native. His half naked form was drawn up in a hideous heap.

His eyes were started from their sockets, and his tongue hung black and putrid from his mouth.

In his breast were a number of the Wooloomoo darts. It was easy to see how he had lost his life.

"My God!" gasped Dalton. "What a fearful poison that must be!"

"You are right!" agreed Frank, "he certainly died in awful agony!"

They regarded the victim of the poisoned darts for some moments after this, and then a startling sound came to their ears.

It was the distant crack of rifles. It came from a point far down the mountain side.

The two men exchanged glances.

"They are engaged," exclaimed Ben. "We ought to go to their assistance."

"And so we will," agreed Frank.

The air-ship now hovered directly over them. Frank made signals to Barney who was at the rail.

The two servitors had dispersed the Wooloomoos in the crater with electric bombs. The air-ship now rapidly descended.

"Begorra, Miser Frank," cried Barney, "I thought yez war both done for. Shure if iver them pizen darts had hit yez."

"It was a close call, Barney!" said Frank, "but go down into the cabin quickly, and bring me up those cases containing the suits of mail!"

"All roight, sor!" cried Barney. "Shure do yez want all av them?"

"Four of them. Each of us should have a suit."

"What?" cried Ben with delight, "have you as many as that, Frank?"

"Oh, yes, half a dozen of them I guess. It seems to be necessary to wear them just now."

"Indeed yes! It will be perhaps the saving of our lives!"

"They will enable us to make open warfare safely upon the Wooloomoos. That is worth a good deal."

"I should say sc, when a single one of those poisoned darts will cause so horrible a death."

Barney quickly returned with the chain suits. Each one of the voyagers put one on.

Then the air-ship leaped up into space again.

Down the mountain side Frank allowed it to drift. The sounds of distant conflict became plainer.

Suddenly a startling scene burst upon the view of all.

Just at that moment the mighty forest which for a ways covered the mountain side, cleared and showed a deep rift in the mountain wall.

There was a broad shelf with a natural parapet of loose boulders. Upon this and behind the shelter of the boulders were a score of men.

They were mostly natives, and half clad in the picturesque costume of the Gold Coast.

But three of them were dressed in rough hunting suits and wore dilapidated cork hats. These three were white men.

A great cry burst from Dalton's lips.

"Found, by Jupiter!" he shouted. "Hurrah! luck is with us. We have won success!"

The air-ship floated above the exploring party. Already they had seen it and were evidently regarding it with astonishment.

"They don't know what to make of us!" cried Ben. "Go down a little, Frank, so that I can speak with the boys!"

Frank at once complied.

The air-ship sank down to within a hundred feet of the earth. The exploring party had ceased firing upon the Wooloomoos who were scattered in clefts of the rocks opposite.

That their deadly darts had done execution was plainly seen, as two of the natives lay dead.

"Hello, Ward Belden!" shouted Dalton. "Don't you know me?"

A handsome, bronzed face youth, with a smoking Winchester in his hands, stared at Dalton, and then cried:

"Ben Dalton, on my honor!"

"That's who it is!" cried the whole souled broker. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Glad!" retorted the millionaire's son. "Well, I should say so! You're the first white man we've seen in a year."

"You don't say!"

"Yes, I do. But, saints defend us, what have you got there—an air-ship?"

"That's what it is," replied Ben. "You never saw one before?"

"I should say not. So the problem of aerial navigation is solved!"

"Just so."

"Well, that beats me! But what has brought you out to this lonely part of the world?"

"I have come here to find you," replied Dalton, bluntly.

CHAPTER X.

DALTON MAKES AN ARGUMENT.

THE young explorer looked amazed.

"To find me!" he exclaimed. "What do you want of me?"

"Why, your father wants you brought home. He has a conniption fit. You were reported dead, and I am not sure now but that you are and this is all a dream."

Young Belden laughed.

"My father's fears were unnecessary," he said. "I never felt better in my life. As for Jack and Allie here, so far as I know they are all right."

"You bet we are!" cried the two young companions of young Belden.

"Well, I never!" gasped Dalton, somewhat taken aback. "Then I've come all the way out here for nothing!"

"So far as our welfare is concerned you have," laughed Ward.

"And these are all the thanks I get!" said the discomfited broker. "I've a mind to go right back home!"

"Don't do that!" protested Ward. "Come down and have a talk with us. Tell us who is the inventor of that beautiful air-ship?"

"He is right—here!" cried Dalton, pulling Frank to the rail. "Allow me to introduce Mr. Frank Reade, Jr."

The air-ship descended and made a landing. Frank and Dalton stepped down from the deck and the introduction was made more formal.

It was a pleasant meeting all around, and the three plucky young explorers received the news from home with avidity.

In spite of their first protestations, they were fain to admit that they would like much to go back and were a trifle homesick.

"But have we not done well?" cried Ward, proudly. "We have traveled through the most perilous parts of Africa, and experienced many thrilling adventures and are alive to tell it."

"At one time two of us were down with jungle fever!" declared Allie Vane.

"And Allie nigh died from the bite of a puff adder!" said Jack Peters.

The coast natives who made up the train were more than ordinarily intelligent and could speak English, French and Spanish.

Out of their number of one hundred upon leaving the Gold Coast scarcely twenty-five were left. Three-fourths of their number had succumbed to the perils of the country.

At this moment attention was diverted by an attack from the Wooloomoos.

A great shower of darts came flying over the cliff.

"They are the worst foes we have had!" said Ward. "Those darts are a frightful thing to stand up against."

"I think you have borne charmed lives!" said Frank.

"I am sure we have!"

"But—what benefits have you derived from your explorations?"

"Much, I trust," said Ward. "We have passed through a wonderful region. If civilization ever penetrates it, it will be the center of the world. We discovered a land literally flowing in milk and honey. Gold, silver and precious stones abound."

"Then you have placed your names high upon the scroll of fame. You will win your reward!"

"For the last month it has been a close question as to whether or not we should live to get out of this country," said Ward, "the Wooloomoos are the very worst foe we have met."

"Indeed, I believe you are right," said Frank. "Ah, look out!"

Another shower of darts came up over the cliffs.

But the aerial voyagers had on their suits of mail and so did not flinch.

Ward and his friends had a narrow escape, however. Frank's eyes flashed angrily.

"I think it is about time we stopped that sort of thing," he declared. "Bring out some electric bombs, Barney."

"All right, sir!" replied the Celt.

While Barney was after the bombs Frank explained more fully the wonderful mechanism of the Scud.

The young African explorers listened with the deepest of interest.

"Indeed, Mr. Reade," said Allie Vane, "you are a wonderful inventor. There is nothing on earth more marvelous than your air-ship!"

"That is true!" chimed in Jack Peters.

Frank laughed and thanked them.

"You do me too much honor," he said. Then turning to Ben Dal-

ton, "but I say, friend Dalton, we came to Africa to find these young gentlemen. We have succeeded. Now what is the programme?"

"Just so!" replied Ben; "your father, Ward, commissioned me to bring you home if—"

"Well!" said Ward, with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

"If you have had enough of African exploration!"

"My father and you, as well, are very kind to go to so much trouble," said Ward, seriously. "And I assure you I appreciate it highly. But before answering I must consult with my brother explorers. What say you, Allie and Jack?"

The two youths thus addressed replied:

"We are satisfied if you are, Ward."

"That's it!" cried the broker, triumphantly. "Now, Ward, do not forget that your father is in deep distress over your prolonged absence."

"Indeed, I am sorry," said Ward, with deepest concern, "but really I had no way to send a message home to him. We have been buried in this wilderness for a twelvemonth."

"Then you can atone for your neglect, enforced though it was, by responding to your father's call. Remember that he is an old man, and you may not have him long."

Ward hesitated a moment.

There were tears in his usually resolute eyes. He was undergoing an inward struggle.

"Mr. Reade has brought me away out here in his air ship to find you," continued Ben. "Of course you might roam about Africa for years, but have you not already gained as much as you will? Was it not your purpose to find and explore the Mountains of the Moon?"

"It was," replied Ward.

"And you have succeeded?"

"I have!"

"Now why expose yourself further to danger and privation? Why not go back to your father?"

Ward grasped Dalton's hand.

"I see it in the right light!" he cried. "It is true that I owe it to my father to go home. I have accomplished the great object of my expedition into Africa. I am satisfied."

"And you will go?"

"Yes."

Dalton fairly embraced the youth. But now a new difficulty presented itself.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the young inventor; "how can I leave my faithful guard? They have stood by me through thick and thin. To leave them here unprotected would be to leave them to die."

For a moment the problem was considered by all. It was certainly not easy to solve.

The guards certainly could not travel aboard the air-ship. It could not carry such a number.

"What shall we do, Frank?" said Dalton, in a complete quandary.

The young inventor smiled.

"There is but one way," he said.

"What is it?"

"We must escort them safely back to the coast with the air-ship."

There was a moment's silence. Then Dalton's face lit up.

"I see the point!" he cried. "The air-ship is to hover over them and protect them until they reach home once more!"

"Yes," replied Frank.

"Hurrah! that is the ideal! What do you think of it, Ward?"

"I am more than pleased," replied the young explorer. "It is so kind in Mr. Reade to give us such a glorious opportunity. Why, just as much exploration can be done on the homeward way."

This placed all in the happiest of spirits.

Explanations were quickly made to the colored guard, who were overjoyed at the prospect.

They regarded the air-ship as a most powerful protector, and were willing to start at once.

So the three boy explorers went aboard the air-ship.

This left the little band of blacks below somewhat hemmed in by the Wooloomoos, but Frank said:

"Never you mind! I will settle this case for them."

Up shot the air-ship.

When at an altitude of several hundred feet Barney held it stationary. Frank picked up one of the bombs.

The enemy below were huddled in crevices of the cliffs, and in deep recesses.

They were regarding the air-ship somewhat doubtfully. Frank decided to settle their doubts.

He sent one of the bombs down into their midst.

It exploded with frightful effect. Dozens of the Wooloomoos were hurled into the air.

The boy explorers regarded the feat with amazement.

"Why, really!" exclaimed Ward, "I don't see why you couldn't whip the whole world if you wanted to, Mr. Reade!"

Frank laughed.

"Not so bad as that!" he said, "but I am not afraid of those chaps at all events."

The Wooloomoos yelled fiercely and essayed to wreak their vengeance upon the coast natives.

But Frank sent bomb after bomb into their midst with deadly effect. The result was they were obliged to scatter.

Soon they fled incontinently in every direction.

Of course they could not hope to battle against such a terrific and deadly power which had such an advantage over them.

The battle was ended and the Wooloomoos suffered a defeat. The aerial voyagers realized this with much satisfaction, and Frank Reade, Jr., cried:

"Now there is no reason why we should not march straight on to the coast. In six months' time we should easily reach it!"

"Six months?" cried Ward. "Oh, yes! I assure you in half that time!"

"It is a long and difficult journey to cover on foot," said Frank; "don't forget that."

CHAPTER XI.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

"It is a long journey, Mr. Reade," agreed young Belden; "but part of it need not be made on foot."

"Ah, how do you mean?"

"I mean that at a certain point we can strike various rivers which we ascended in coming hither. We have boats secreted at Dark Lake, which is not more than a month's journey from here." The trip down these rivers may be made quite rapidly I am sure."

"Indeed yes, if that is the case," agreed Frank.

"It is possible that we can reach the Gold Coast in even less time."

"I hope so."

"Again it will not be necessary to escort Benguela and his men all the way. As soon as we reach the border of Makonaland they can proceed without us."

This was the truth. The Makonas were well known as peaceable natives. The course looked clear.

Yet all in the party knew that there were many dangers between there and Makonaland.

They must pass through fierce jungles, dense swamps, and black forests. All infested with wild men and beasts.

However, with the co-operation of the air-ship, it looked reasonable enough to the voyagers, that they would be able to make the trip successfully.

No time was lost in making the start.

Now that the Wooloomoos were dispersed, there was little difficulty in the party's proceeding safely through the mountains.

Benguela, which was the name of the chief of the little band of blacks, faithfully followed Ward's directions.

The black guard were to continually keep the air-ship in sight. In case of an attack from the enemy, the air-ship would bear down to their assistance.

The route through the hills was a devious and difficult one.

As the forests were so deep in the other direction, it was decided to return by the route which they had used coming, namely, over the crater and down through a mighty pass which would finally lead them out on the wide plains, extending for several hundred miles to Dark Lake.

This lake, Ward explained, was a long narrow body of water, fully one hundred miles long.

In it they had sunk their boats so that they might find them upon the return.

Upon reaching the lower end of Dark Lake, it was then possible by a series of portages to keep on descending waters almost all the way to Makonaland.

The most difficult part of the journey, therefore, would be the intervening country to Makonaland.

Traveling on foot was slow work compared with the flight of the air-ship.

The Scud could do nothing but lazily drift over the heads of the foot travelers below.

Benguela and his men were hardy natives and accustomed to just such long journeys, but yet their progress seemed slow.

There was nothing for it but to have patience, however. Nightfall came and the party were yet in the hills.

The natives were extremely fatigued with the day's exertion, so Ward signaled them to camp.

This they did upon the mountain side, overlooking a valley which was akin in ruggedness to the famous illustrations of the entrance to Dante's Inferno.

The air-ship descended and rested near the natives' camp.

Benguela, who was an intelligent black, and could talk English brokenly, came joyfully up and embraced Ward.

"I know you no go and leave Benguela and his men to perish," he cried. "We not forget. Some white men leave us to die when their friends come in flying boat."

"No, Benguela," replied Ward. "I'm not that kind. I would let my friends return without me first."

This pleased the black, who was mightily devoted to the young explorers.

The Wooloomoos did not venture to disturb them that night, and in this they showed wisdom.

For Barney and Pomp alternately watched on the air ship's deck all night. The search-light made all down the mountain side as plain as day.

So it would have been difficult for the black foe to have approached without being seen.

The night wore away without incident. Morning came, and a fresh start was made.

But the Wooloomoos were determined not to let their would-be prey escape without one more attempt to exterminate them.

After the party had started the next morning, a thrilling incident occurred.

Threading a narrow gorge suddenly, Pomp, who was on guard at the air ship's rail, suddenly cried:

"Goily, Marse Frank! Dar am de debbils hid down in dat deep bresh. Shuah's yo' bo'n day am waiting fer de odders to come along."

At once all rushed to the rail.

A startled cry escaped Ward Belden.

"Signal Benguela quick," he cried. "If they get within reach of the darts, there will be an awful tragedy!"

This was true enough as could readily be seen. There was no time lost in making the signal.

At once Benguela and his men came to a halt. They sought the cover of a rocky hill.

And they were none too soon.

The Wooloomoos came to the attack like savage tigers. Nothing seemed able to restrain them.

It was certain that they would have overwhelmed the coast natives had it not been for the co-operation of the air-ship.

Frank shouted rapid orders to Barney who held the Scud down nearer the earth.

Then electric bombs were hurled down in the van of the advancing Wooloomoos.

Wherever these struck a tremendous pile of earth and debris was raised right in the face of the advancing foe.

This for an instant seemed to disconcert the savage natives. But to the surprise of all it did not stop them entirely.

Their valor seemed to merge literally into recklessness. Their one mad purpose was evidently to get at the coast natives, even though they were exterminated for it.

"Upon my word!" cried Ben Dalton. "I never saw the equal of these Wooloomoo natives. They surely mean to win vengeance even at the cost of their own lives!"

"You are right!" agreed Frank. "I am at a loss to know how to stop them!"

"There is but one way!"

"You are right!"

Frank hesitated no longer. While he deplored the necessity of exterminating the Wooloomoos, he admired their superior courage.

He began now to hurl the bombs into their midst.

Dreadful execution was done. Dozens of the savages were slaughtered. Huge trees were felled in their path. An advance seemed an utter impossibility.

But it required persistent work of this kind to bring them to a halt. It was done though, and Benguela and his comrades were saved.

Frank drew a breath of relief when he saw that the Wooloomoos were once more scattered and in full retreat.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "they were the toughest fighters I have run up against in years! They don't seem to know when they are whipped!"

"You are right!" cried Ward. "Thank Heaven, we shall be out of their country to-day!"

Once more advance was made. Ere nightfall came again they were out of the Wooloomoo region, as Ward had said, and these wild barbarians were no longer to be feared.

Day by day the little train of natives struggled on through the dreary wilderness.

The air-ship constantly hovered over them. The Mountains of the Moon gradually faded away in the distance.

The three boy voyagers had been doing a heap of thinking.

"Upon my word, Mr. Reade," said Allie Vane, "I am inclined to the opinion that we would never have got out of those mountains alive but for your opportune coming!"

"So I believe!" cried Jack Peters. "I had no idea those Wooloomoos were such terrible fighters."

"We came upon the scene then just in the nick of time," cried Dalton triumphantly. "Your parents will be glad to see you."

On across the wide plains now the little caravan plodded.

The miles slowly drifted behind. The weeks passed, and one day Ward Belden studied the horizon with a glass and cried:

"Hurrah! we can sight Dark Lake."

This revived the spirits of all.

Once the caravan should get upon the water it was believed that they could travel faster and soon would reach Makonaland.

But thrilling adventures were yet in store.

It was near the hour of noon upon a terribly sultry day that the little party came to the vast border of saw grass which fringed Dark Lake.

Benguela and his men in a transport of delight plunged into the cooling waters.

They disported themselves with such thorough enjoyment that the aerial voyagers, sweltering under awnings, rather envied them.

"Upon my word!" cried Dalton, "I'd like a dip myself!"

"So would I!" cried Ward Belden.

And this sentiment was echoed by the majority.

"Well," said Frank Reade, Jr., readily, "there is no reason why you cannot have it if you desire. Say the word and we will descend."

"There are no Wooloomoos with their poisoned darts in the vicinity," said Dalton, with a sweeping glance about.

"No; the coast seems clear of enemies. I guess it's all right."

"Then let us have the dip by all means."

So Frank lowered the air-ship. It did not rest upon the ground, but was anchored upon the very surface of the limpid waters in the verge of the saw-grass.

Here the water was shallow and clear as crystal and the sandy bottom could be plainly seen.

Not a reptile of any kind was in sight, so there seemed to be nothing to fear.

The Benguela natives were raising the boats some distance away. These had been sunk in the lake to prevent their being stolen.

The aerial voyagers hesitated no longer, but threw off their clothes.

Into the water Ben Dalton was the first to dive.

Down he went like an arrow, and came up puffing and splashing.

The boys followed him.

Barney and Pomp did the same. Frank was not averse to the dip, but thought it best to wait until the others had their turn.

The young inventor sat by the rail and watched them with interest. The Benguelas had raised their boats, and were now paddling to the spot.

Suddenly as Frank looked up, he saw them waving their arms and shouting frantically.

At first this action puzzled him.

Then like a flash it swept across him that they were signals of warning.

At the same moment he also saw the water intervening, ripple in a strange manner and at various points.

Some strange black objects were visible just under the surface. Frank sprang up wildly.

He saw that they were ravenous foes. Wildly he shouted:

"Come aboard, all of you, quick! The crocodiles are coming!"

From the opposite shore these ravenous saurians had been attracted by the splashing of the swimmers.

They were evidently counting upon a feast, and did not mean to suffer any disappointment if they could help it.

Nor would they have but for Frank's timely warning.

In an instant the swimmers went scrambling for the air-ship's deck. All got aboard but Barney.

He was some distance out in the water. A huge crocodile was almost upon him.

In another moment the Celt would have met his fate had it not been for a lucky intervention.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS THE END.

THE Celt was dangerously near the saurian's jaws. Before he could have reached the air-ship he must have been overtaken.

Frank had rushed upon deck with a rifle.

He was about to aim at the crocodile, a useless procedure, for no bullet could penetrate its tough hide, when an incident caused him to desist.

One of the African canoes shot between Barney and the air-ship. The chief Benguela was standing in the bow.

He held in his hand a powerful two edged knife. Just at that moment with a yell he dived into the water.

He had dived directly between the crocodile and Barney.

A great cry went up from those on board the air-ship.

"Great heavens!" gasped Ben Dalton. "What will he do?"

"He is sacrificing himself to save Barney!" cried Frank.

"No," said Ward Belden. "Keep cool and you will see!"

Benguela, in diving, went deep. He was familiar with the habits of the crocodile and knew his vulnerable point.

This was the belly. A sharp stroke with a powerful knife would penetrate the monster's hide in this part.

So he dived deep and came up directly under the crocodile's belly.

Of course there could be no force to his blow unless he was braced against something. So he threw an arm about one of the reptile's hind legs.

In this position the saurian could not reach him with his mouth or strike him with his tail.

Then followed a terrific battle in the water.

Benguela managed to get his head above the water often enough to get breath.

Then he plied his knife with terrific force. Under the water the blows were given.

Blood tinged the water from the crocodile's vitals. Such a struggle could not last long.

It was quickly ended.

The crocodile floated belly upward on the surface of the lake. Benguela was pulled into the canoe just in time to escape the jaws of another crocodile.

Barney meanwhile had been pulled safely aboard the air-ship.

Cheer upon cheer rent the air for the brave Benguela.

The aerial voyagers made him come aboard, and Barney fairly embraced him.

"Begorra, it's a dead man I'd be now but for yez!" he cried.

"Shure I'll niver fergit yez!"

Frank made the black chief a handsome present and he went back to his boat as happy as could be.

The other crocodiles had now disappeared. The danger was over, but the fun of further bathing was spoiled.

The bathers rubbed themselves down on deck, however, and mutually congratulated each other upon their fortunate escape.

But the sport of the day was not over by any means.

Huge fish swam in the limpid waters, and Frank produced some fishing tackle.

The finny crew were ravenous, and bit even at a bare hook, so that in a little while there was plenty of fresh fish aboard the Scud.

Then Pomp proved his skill by cooking a number of them in a manner which ravished the appetites of the aerial voyagers.

Frank decided to remain at Dark Lake until the next day. Toward evening, when the air became cool, Barney and Pomp brought out a banjo and a fiddle.

Barney played the fiddle as only a native Irishman can.

He sang bits of Irish ballads in an entrancing fashion. Then Pomp came in for his share.

The darky played the banjo out of sight.

He sang delicious melodies of old plantation days, and also did a double shuffle.

This was an entertainment most irresistible, and none enjoyed it more than the three boy explorers, Ward, Allie and Jack. They applauded in a hearty fashion.

Benguela and his men gathered about in their boats and also evidently enjoyed the affair.

The moon came up early in the evening, as round and full as a silver ball.

The air was balmy and redolent with perfume of wild water flowers. Altogether the occasion was a most delightful one.

"Upon my word!" cried Ben Dalton, "Africa is not such a bad place after all. If it could be like this all the time I could stay here forever."

But Frank laughed.

"There is no land like America for the Americans," he said. "You will be glad to see home."

"I don't deny that," replied the broker.

The aerial voyagers slept well that night.

The next morning after sunrise the start was made again. Down the lake floated the canoes of the Benguelas.

One hundred miles of travel over this lake, which was really a chain of shallow pools, surrounded by deep marshes, and then they came to the outlet.

Here it was necessary to portage for twenty miles.

But the Benguelas took their light boats on their backs and in less than a single day covered this distance.

They now embarked upon the swift current of a rushing river.

In places this was broken into dangerous rapids and even cataracts. At such places it became necessary to make a portage.

But progress was more rapid, and in this way the days passed into weeks.

They were rapidly nearing Makonaland. Once there leave could be taken of Benguela safely enough.

Then it was a swift flight for home. All looked forward to this most eagerly.

But for one peril which yet lay in their path leave might be taken of the Benguelas at any time.

They were compelled to pass through the Murambo country before reaching Makonaland.

The Murambos were an extremely hostile race. There was no doubt but that they would make war upon the Benguelas.

So the air-ship remained with the caravan a week longer. Trouble with the Murambos came, as was expected.

Unwittingly the Benguelas stumbled upon a hunting party in the forest.

The Murambo hunters thought it was an invasion of their country, and at once gave battle. There were lively episodes in swift succession.

The old chief Benguela was right in his element. He knew that the Murambos carried no poison darts, and on even terms the coast natives feared no foe.

The Murambos assumed the aggressive, and a lively battle followed.

They speedily had their hands full.

The Benguelas seemed to need no help from the air-ship, so the voyagers watched the battle with interest.

In every sense the Benguelas had the best of it.

They drove the Murambos back into their village, set fire to their bamboo huts, and otherwise gave them a hot time.

Of course, Benguela's men had the advantage in the fact that they had repeating rifles, though the Murambos outnumbered them a dozen to one.

After destroying the village and scattering their foe, Benguela was content, and the party once more went on its triumphal way.

Two days later they crossed the border into Makonaland. Here leave was taken by them of the air-ship.

Upon the banks of a swift rolling river the parting took place.

Benguela and his men, all embraced the three boy explorers. Then Ward made them handsome presents, giving them all that was in the outfit—rifles, clothing, ammunition and all.

The natives considered themselves well paid and were delighted.

Then once more an embrace was given and the boy explorers went aboard the air-ship.

The Scud shot up into the air a thousand feet. The voyagers all crowded to the rail, and Ben Dalton cried:

"Take your last look at Central Africa. None of us may ever see it again."

Then the air-ship headed for the coast. Barney put on all speed, and like a bird of passage the Scud was off for America.

The friends of millionaire Belden, as well as the magnate himself, were all anxious to learn what the air-ship expedition had accomplished.

The press of America and Europe had long been on the lookout. An agent had tarried on the Gold Coast for the express purpose of catching the first report.

It came one day.

The great cable wires which crossed the seas carried the thrilling news that the Flying Scud was on the way home.

Then later followed the report that the three lost explorers had been found and were also on the way.

Millionaire Belden could hardly contain himself. He fairly danced in the surfeit of his joy.

Watch was kept daily for the appearance of the Scud, but three weeks drifted by before she actually made her appearance.

Then one day a dispatch came from Readestown:

"DEAR FATHER: Arrived here on board the Flying Scud to-day. Will be with you to-morrow sure. Your loving son,
WARD BELDEN."

Frank had proceeded straight to Readestown without stopping in

New York, for the fact that the air-ship's machinery had threatened to give out, and he deemed it best to get her home as soon as possible.

Ward, Allie and Jack, accompanied by Ben Dalton, reached New York the next evening.

Hosts of their friends met them, and it was altogether a most happy occasion. It seemed good to get home.

Frank Reade, Jr., and Barney and Pomp, were warmly welcomed in Readestown.

Their great trip to the Mountains of the Moon had been a glowing success, yet they were not sorry to get home.

The Scud, however, would hardly be able to sail the blue ether again.

The distance had been great and the strain upon an air-ship far different than that upon any other kind of a vessel.

Owing to its light frame and delicate machinery it must necessarily wear out quicker.

But Frank declared that he had another on the tapis and would make it even superior to the Scud. Until such time we will with the reader's kind permission take our leave of Frank Reade, Jr., Readestown, the Flying Scud and all the other characters of our story.

[THE END.]

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